MUSIC IN BRAILLE

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HOUSE FOR THE BLIND

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—Edmund Kennedy

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MUSIC IN BRAILLE

Musical Digest, v. XVII, No. 3, 1932, April

HOW THE BLIND MUSICIAN, STUDENT AND EXPERT, READS MUSIC

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IN these days, blindness need never be an obstacle in learning music, either for those who have been blind from birth or for those who have lost their sight after years of vision. Thanks to braille type—the system of embossed dots, grouped into various combinations of six or fewer, which the blind read by passing their finger-tips across the page—persons of all ages and degrees of capability are not handicapped in taking music lessons, or acquiring new works. And if they happen to be composers, they have no difficulty in transcribing their music.

It is not generally recalled that Louis Braille, who invented the system named after him, was a musician. He had become blind at the age of three, and was only twenty, in 1829, when he worked out his idea. Though the system was immediately adapted for books and reading material, Braille himself used it more for his music, and elaborated from the principle a musical notation.

It took some time to be perfected. Through a period of years braille type and musical notation spread all over Europe and America, but as there was no centralization, each country began to develop its own variations and peculiarities. The differences which grew up were not fundamental, but they were confusing to the musicians of one country who came into possession of musical scores which had been made in other countries. An international conference in 1888 agreed upon a standard notation, but about thirty years later the same state of confusion as before had returned.

CO-ORDINATION of braille musical notation was finally arrived at in 1929, at an international congress in Paris, when delegates from the United States, England, France, Germany and Italy met to determine a notation which should be the official one all over the world. Thirteen other countries abided by the decisions of this congress, and all music published thenceforward was cleared of local characteristics and could be understood by a musician in Mexico as readily as by one in Berlin or Rome.

Many musicians have been heard to wonder why braille type must be used to transcribe music for the blind, and to ask if it would not be possible to employ the usual notation, embossed in such a way as to be perceptible to the fingers. This method has been tried, but found impracticable for several reasons. One is that the staffs and notes have to be made two or three times their normal size for the finger-tips to receive any accurate impression. Another is that the process is too long and expensive to allow embossing a large quantity of music. Accustomed, moreover, to reading the braille alphabet, a blind person who is learning music for the first time can make quicker progress with a system in which he is at home.

BRAILLE musical notation, like braille reading matter, sounds a complicated and protracted affair. Actually, it is as efficient a medium as that which the seeing musician uses. The director of a music school for the blind said that, other things such as intelligence and desire being equal, the average blind person, child or adult, can learn music as rapidly and as thoroughly as anybody else. The early stages are a little harder to pass through, that is all.

In the case of piano-instruction, for instance, a beginning is made by accustoming the hands to the position of the keys, and learning where the notes are before starting on the notation.

There are no separate staffs in the braille notation. A separate sign, or a combination of signs, stands for everything on the page—time-signatures, notes, sharps, flats, fingering, key-signatures and so forth. The signs follow one another, like words in a book. As may be seen from the accompanying illustration, some of the symbols which stand for the time-values may be used twice over, as the number of notes in the bar is a clear enough indication of their value.

Clefs are not used to indicate pitch. Instead, there are seven pitch-signs or octave-signs, one of which is placed before any group of notes which occur within the compass of a certain octave, the keyboard of a seven-octave piano being used as the gauge. For instance, Middle C is marked as 4th octave C. The B immediately below is 3rd octave B.

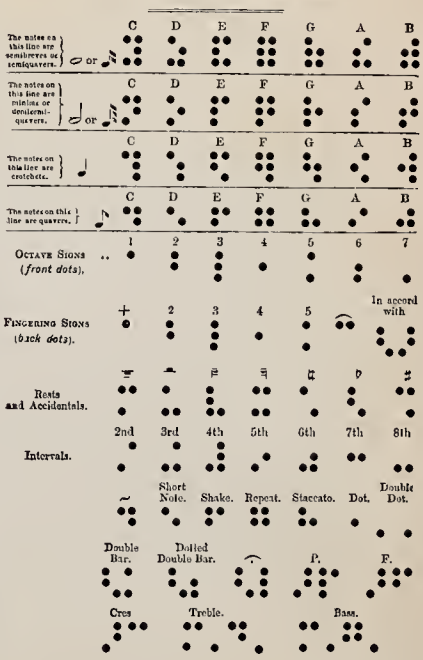
There are two methods of writing music in braille. One of them, the "vertical score" method, is used where the music consists principally of chords, such as hymn-tunes. It is based on indication of the intervals between the lowest bass note and the other notes in the chord. Where the writing is freer, as in the majority of cases, the "bar-by-bar" method is employed.

HERE, the bars are written one after another, each bar being divided into two sections. First comes the left-hand part, followed by the right-hand. A pianist playing over a piece he has never heard or played before learns it in this way, bar after bar, fitting the two sections of each bar together as he proceeds. It is evident that this requires some ingenuity on the part of a beginner, and it sounds a cumbrous and laborious process. As a matter of fact, however, an experienced organist or pianist can go ahead very quickly. If his memorizing technic is advanced, he can have the work by heart after a few repetitions. It must not be forgotten that before a blind person takes up music he is generally able to read braille type at a high speed, and this proficiency in the system enables him to pick up the musical notation fairly quickly.

Then the composer has the same advantages that the writer of braille has. He can use one of the small typewriters designed especially for braille. These are machines with six keys, each corresponding to one position of the dots in its group of six. As one or more keys are pressed they emboss the dots on a sheet of thick manilla paper held in the machine. Thus a composer, once he has mastered his notation,

(Turn to page 32)

BRAILLE MUSICAL ALPHABET.



herself with that of her husband. She forms that necessary barrier between Respighi and the rush of outside events which are meaningless in themselves and could bring nothing to his development. During all thirteen years, the couple have been separated only one week, and that was due simply to a professional engagement which Respighi was obliged to keep.

HIS family has always been connected with the Church. There was the ancestor already alluded to. Today there is a high dignitary in Roman ecclesiastical circles who is an uncle. But the most famous of Respighi's church relatives was his great-uncle, Cardinal Mezzofanti, the phenomenal linguist of last century, who could speak fifty-eight languages perfectly.

Something of the Cardinal's linguistic gifts has descended to his grand-nephew. Not in the same profusion, but with the same thoroughness. Resphigi knows only about eight or nine tongues, but he is at home in them all, from Russian and two other Slavic languages, to German, Flemish and all the Romance languages. English he knows least of any, as far as speaking goes, though he is well acquainted with the literature, especially Shakespeare. For a long time he has studied Egyptology, and can decipher, slowly but fairly accurately, any set of hieroglyphics.

Today he lives in a villa on the outskirts of Rome. Appropriately enough it is called "I Pini." Here he works, far

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—FRANCES ELLIOTT

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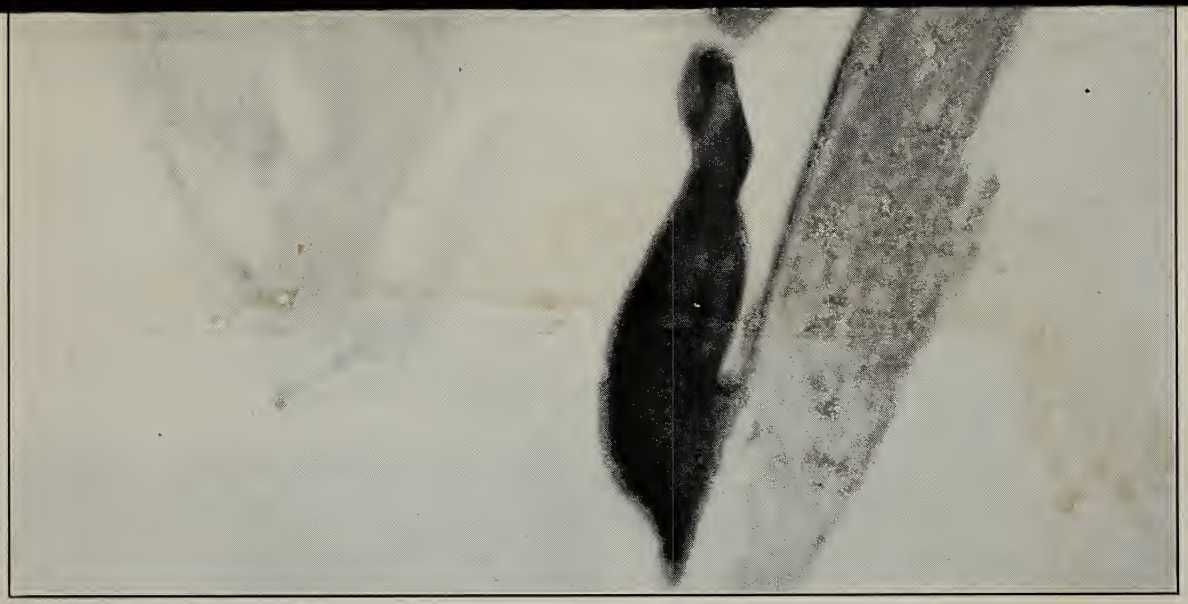
IN Italy, the spirit among composers is far less malicious than in many places. Jealousies there always are, of course, wherever two or more are gathered together in the name of art. But there is not so much of the acidulous rivalry to be found in Rome or Milan as there is in Paris, say, or some other centres. Respighi talks about his contemporaries, for instance, to the point, but without personal feeling. He tells of a young Italian composer, trained in France, who had a première performed in Rome. For days afterwards the young man wore a baffled expression, because, as he later explained, most of the composers present had congratulated him with evident warmth and sincerity on his

writes an opera if he is given half a chance and some paper. When he served one year as judge on one of the national committees, nearly a hundred operatic scores were handed in for consideration, and this number is the average.

OPERAS have come from Respighi's pen too. He is now in the middle of a new one, "La Fiamma." When that is completed and produced, he has a new project in view, which seems to bear out what he said about the return to simplicity of form and expression. He will probably collaborate with the poet Gabriele d'Annunzio on a work, "La Vergine e la Città," in which there will be no soloists. Choruses will take their place. Details are naturally absent at the present time, but the



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dren's concerts, for which no admission fee was charged in some cases; the St. Louis Symphony concerts, for which children paid for tickets at the rate of fifteen cents or a quarter; in Cleveland, series of concerts for children have been offered at a twenty-five cent admission fee. Minneapolis, Cincinnati, Rochester, San Francisco, Los Angeles and other major symphony orchestras have co-operated in this work, too. Some of the organizations mentioned have recently been obliged to forego their activities in this direction on account of prevailing conditions, but no constructive efforts can ever be said to have been entirely lost.

APROPOS of orchestral concerts for children, George H. Gartlan, director of music in the public schools of Greater New York, stated not long ago that "there is room for the establishment of orchestras in every borough of the City of Greater New York, for which a nominal fee would be charged for the children who attend." Any clearer recognition of what listening to orchestras does for the public school child would be unnecessary.

As for the other category mentioned, the instances in which primary musical interest is aroused by letting children make their own music. . . . It is scarcely necessary to recall the fact that the United States possesses the highest number of school bands and orchestras in the world. How that has been achieved, and at what great practical difficulties, the music supervisor knows. But he has been helped by such schemes as exist in New Ynrk, where the education committee of the Philharmonic-Symphony gives scholarships in all instruments of the symphony orchestra to the best pupils of the public schools and gives them training under the leaders of the respective sections of the orchestra. Then, when these pupils have finished their course, they return to the schools and act as pupil-instructors. The plan is carried out as extensively as possible, and its advantages are obvious. The best instruction available is in this manner carried directly into the school.

IT must be remembered, that however great the total number of bands and orchestras, and however high the total of school-children participating in those ensembles, the majority of pupils gain their musical experience through the use of their singing voices. This is one section of musical education where supervisors have received little or no outside assistance. What has been accomplished in this direction has been mainly due to the work of the supervisor. And to spend a short time listening to a high school chorus is to be convinced that the job has been done to the best of the ability of those men and women who are laying the foundation-stone for the musical future of the major portion among the population of this country.

Music In Braille

(Continued from page 24)

may write without further hindrance. He is not compelled to wait to dictate his music.

The typewriters are also of great value for copying music. The amount of music which has already been transposed into braille is comparatively small, though the New York Public Library alone has about seven thousand different scores of all kinds, piano, vocal, violin, organ and so forth. These may be borrowed by any blind person throughout the United States, and many of the borrowers like to make copies of the music they take out. It may be remarked that for a long time all braille matter, reading nr musical, has been carried free of charge by the Post Office.

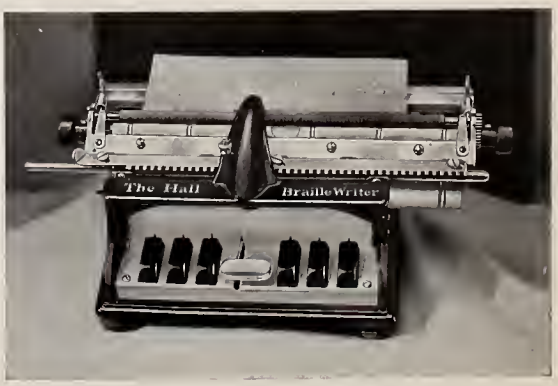
IN nearly every state there is a school for the blind, and almost every school has a music department. Some of these institutions, such as the Illinois School, in Jacksonville, Ill., have presses for the publication of music. Another large press is that in Paris, the American Braille Press, which publishes a "Musical Review for the Blind" and a literary review, both of them monthly periodicals. These are distributed free of charge all over the world, with a small nominal charge for postage.

Teaching in these schools is carried on by both seeing and blind teachers. The latter are just as capable as the former, though it is generally agreed that for beginners who are learning instruments a teacher who can see the first positions of the pupil's body and hands and correct them from the outset is preferable. Some of the schools have organized choral societies, and in one or two cases a small orchestra.

Neither choral work nor orchestral work, if the pieces played are kept at a fairly simple level, is difficult. Everything must, of course, be learned absolutely by heart, but the fact remains that music, and participation in music, is in no wise barred to those without the faculty of sight. At the Lighthouse, a free music school for the blind in New York, where voice and every sort of instrument are taught to about two hundred and fifty students whose ages vary from four to sixty, the chorus has an extensive repertory of folk-songs and also such works as Beethoven's "Nature's Praise of God" and Haydn's "Creation." Public performances are given by the organization. A small orchestra is being formed now. Co-ordination is a little harder to arrive at in an orchestra than in a chorus, but some remarkable effects are being obtained.

AS development in teaching methods among the blind progresses, and results, very clearly demonstrated, are arrived at, it becomes less and less of a phenomenon to the man in the street. Time was when a sightless musician, who had learned to play and read music after he had been stricken with blindness, was a subject for either a slightly morbid curiosity or for a sensation. Today the efficiency of the methods used and the devotion of the teachers have done away with these attitudes. Blindness is no longer a check, or even a hindrance, to one's ability to become a part of the musical life of his community.

—S. B.



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